Artificial Intelligence and Conspiracy Theory Plausibility

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The Prevalence of Conspiracy Theory

- According to a 2021 Public Religion Research Institute survey, 16% of the American population, or approximately 41 million people, believe three central claims made by the Q-Anon conspiracy theory:

- "(1) The government, media, and financial sector are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation;

- (2) There is a storm coming soon that will sweep away the elites in power and restore the rightful leaders; and

- (3) Because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country."
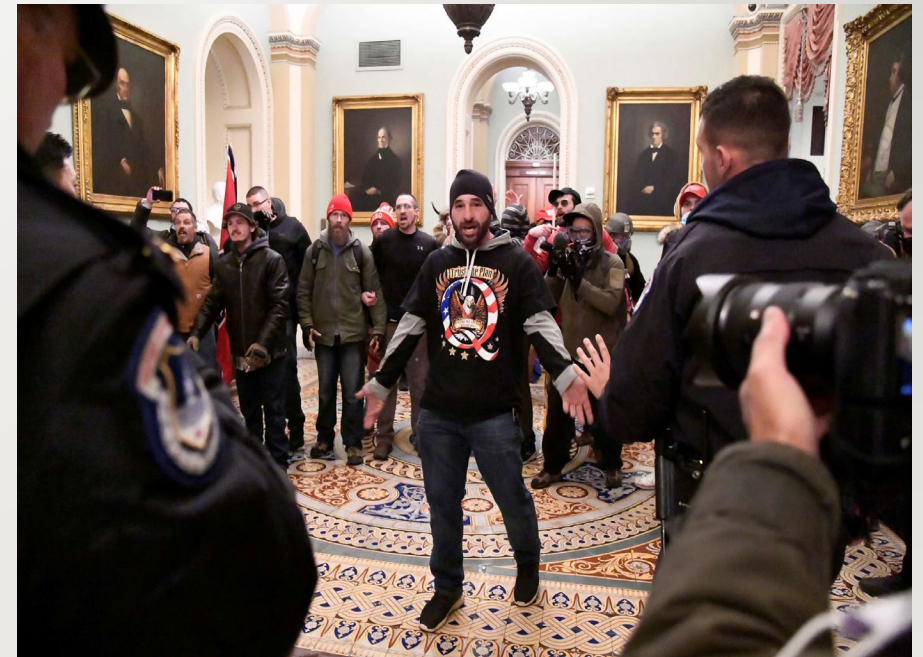

Photo retrieved October 24, 2023 from https://abcnews.go.com/US/qanon-emerges-recurring-theme-criminal-cases-tied-us/story?id=75347445

The Dynamics of Conspiracy Theory

Photo retrieved October 24, 2023 from
https://www.townandcountrymag.com/leisure/arts-and-culture/a33485165/umbrella-man-jfk-assassination-academy-true-story/

- Philosopher Brian Keeley identifies *"errant data"* as "[t]he chief tool of the conspiracy theorist" (117).

- Errant data fall into two different categories: "(a) unaccounted-for data and (b) contradictory data" (Keeley 218). Official accounts often fail to explain certain data related to a focal event (unaccounted-for data) or to adequately square certain data with facts emphasized by the narratives (contradictory data).

- Two examples: the 'Umbrella Man' (unaccounted-for data) and eyewitnesses reports of two men visible in the six floor windows of the Texas School Book Depository (contradictory data).

The Fulton County Elections Warehouse Conspiracy Theory

Photo retrieved October 24, 2023 from https://www.wsbtv.com/news/local/atlanta/fulton-officials-say-ballots-were-never-danger-after-alarm-went-off-elections-warehouse/GMJTD5JYBFELFNFIA43DHZAIJA/

- A group of Trump supporters file a lawsuit requesting a third recount of Fulton County, Georgia 2020 absentee ballots. The ballots are stored in a warehouse in northwest Atlanta. Lawyers suing for the recount hire a security firm to keep the warehouse under continuous surveillance.

- On the afternoon of Saturday, May 29, 2021, an alarm is triggered in the warehouse. Before the alarm sounded, on-duty Fulton County Sheriff's deputies monitoring the warehouse had unaccountably left before first being relieved by fellow deputies.

A Photo Tells a Deceptive Tale

- Off-duty Douglas County Sheriff's deputies, hired by the security firm, respond to the alarm by checking for unlocked doors. Two deputies find an unlocked door and enter the warehouse. They later take a photo showing the door standing wide-open.

- The photograph of the open door circulates via social media as evidence of either lax election security or a conspiratorial effort to tamper with (or even destroy) the absentee ballots.

Photo retrieved October 24, 2023 from https://www.gpb.org/news/2021/06/01/fulton-county-investigating-alarm-at-election-warehouse-conspiracy-theories-grow

Official Explanations Follow

- A *Georgia Public Broadcasting News* article explains that an employee exited the door without locking it (Fowler).

- A *Vice News* report, based on security camera footage, explains that the warehouse's unlocked door was momentarily left open and photographed by the Douglas County Sheriff's deputies (May and Johnson).

- *PolitiFact* provides the Fulton County election director's speculation that "a rodent" most likely set off a motion-activated alarm on the second floor (McCarthy).

- In these news reports, both the triggered security alarm and the unlocked door are identified as chance or unintentional occurrences.
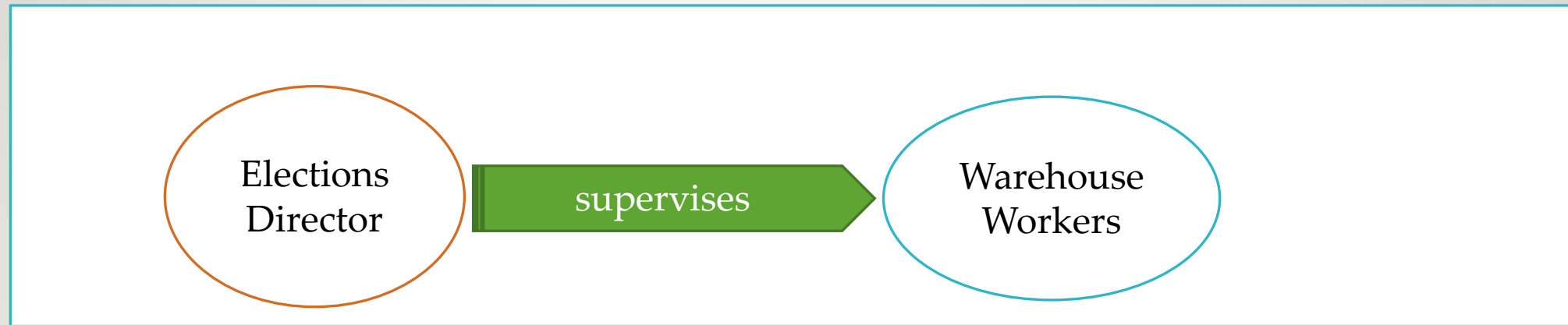
Could Knowledge Graphs Help Salvage An Endangered Conspiracy Theory?

- AI-powered knowledge graphs, supplied with large amounts of data, could be used as a resource for salvaging a conspiracy theory in danger of refutation.

- Knowledge graphs begin with *nodes* (persons, places, things) whose relationships are defined in terms of *edges*. With a large amount of data to work with, knowledge graphs could identify multiple relationships among different people, places, and persons.

- This artificial intelligence tool, by drawing upon these relationships, could help conspiracy theorists address criticisms and objections. As "UCTs typically seek to tie together seemingly unrelated events" (Keeley 117), AI-powered knowledge graphs could well serve this purpose.

Image retrieved on October 24, 2023 from https://www.expert.ai/blog/expediting-enterprise-knowledge-graphs-with-supervised-and-unsupervised-learning/

The Nodes and Edges of a Knowledge Graph

Elections Director

supervises

Warehouse Workers

Node   Edge   Node

The Fulton County Case Revisited

- An AI-powered knowledge graph could help defend the absentee ballot conspiracy theory from the official news and government accounts. The knowledge graph could identify the political affiliations and work histories of individual warehouse workers and of elections officials to better support the ballot tampering suggestion and cast doubt upon the news reports' explanations based upon unintentional and accidental occurrences.

- The knowledge graph could also be used to identify any personal or professional relationships between the warehouse personnel/election officials and the Fulton County Sherriff's deputies who had left before being relieved.

The Dangers of Tenuous Connections and Plausible Conclusions

- An AI-powered knowledge graph could identify existing relationships between nodes while inferring new ones. The conspiracy theorist (whether a bad actor or a true believer) could reference these relationships to lend greater plausibility to a new theory or to defend one already under scrutiny.

- An AI-powered knowledge graph could draw tenuous connections and identify irrelevant relationships serving as evidence of plausible conclusions.

- Referencing a vast network of relationships, an AI-powered knowledge graph could be misused to create a connective tissue of innuendo if not of outright lies.

Drawing Irrelevant Connections

- "Given the events of October 7th, a more likely explanation would be that he [Ismael Haniyeh] back-briefed the Kremlin on Hamas's final preparations for an attack timed to take place on Putin's 71st birthday—a quid pro quo" (Sweet and Toth in *The Hill*).

- Vladimir Putin's birthday, in this example, represents an irrelevant fact connected to a focal event as one of its explanatory factors. The authors attempt to provide additional explanatory support for their hypothesis that Putin orchestrated Hamas' attack by connecting the focal event to Putin's birthday.

- However, as E.H. Carr would argue, a historian would almost certainly exclude Putin's birthday from a serious explanation of Hamas's attack since she would never draw the general conclusion that 'militant groups attack on autocrats' birthdays.'

Photo retrieved October 24, 2023 from
https://www.gettyimages.com/photos/putin-puppy

The Irrelevant Connection: A Tried and 'True' Propaganda Method

- Drawing or identifying tenuous and irrelevant connections between people, places, and things has often served the interests of those seeking to shape public opinion but required much more effort in the absence of Artificial Intelligence.

- Joseph McCarthy on CBS's *See It Now* (1954): "Just one more [example] if I may impose on your time. The issue of March 26 [the *Daily Worker*]. This issue has two articles attacking witch-hunting, three articles attacking McCarthy, a cartoon of McCarthy, and an article in praise of Mr. Edward R. Murrow."

- Without explaining why the *Daily Worker* praised Edward R. Murrow, Joseph McCarthy invites the public to conclude that the mere mention of Murrow in the *Daily Worker* proves that Murrow is sympathetic to communism.

Photo retrieved October 24, 2023 from https://www.historyonthenet.com/authentichistory/1946-1960/4-cwhomefront/1-mccarthyism/

Another Cambridge Analytica?

- Could political campaigns harness AI-powered knowledge graphs in the 2024 presidential election cycle?

- Before the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump's campaign hired Cambridge Analytica to create and send personalized political advertisements to potential voters.

- Cambridge Analytical utilized the data of more than 80 million Facebook users to develop personality profiles for targeted political advertisements.

- Given the numerous conspiracy theories concerning a 'stolen election' following the 2020 presidential election, the use of AI-powered knowledge graphs drawing upon massive amounts of data becomes a real possibility.

Final Ethical Reflection

- Immanuel Kant argued for the ethical imperative to "[a]ct so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person, or in that of another, always an end, and never as a means only" *(Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals,* 429).

- Kant maintained that the human person "is not a thing and hence not something to be used merely as a means" (429).

- Conspiracy theories designed to manipulate public opinion do not respect persons as ends and must be rejected on ethical grounds.

- Conspiracy theories, even well-intentioned ones, should be 'handled with care.'

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